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AUTHOR Manzo, Anthony V.
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ABSTRACT

Proceeding from the traditional principles of the directed reading activity strategy in the classroom, a group reading approach was developed to aid graduate students in a reading methods course both to study and comprehend their textbook and to provide a teaching method for future classroom use at the secondary or junior college level. The design involved eight steps: identification of the general purpose or critical issue of the text; distribution of sections of this purpose among class groups; individual reading and notation of material; preparation of the group statement, evolved from each individual's notes; presentation of this statement to a student critic; adjustment of the statement following discussion with the critic; presentation of the statement to the class--directly, through the teacher, or in writing with parenthetical teacher comments; and assessment of the learning achieved. This approach proved effective in stimulating an intensive, sustained learning effort by students. (JM)

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The Group Reading Activity -- a class reads a book*

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Anthony V. Manzo
Reading & Improvement of Learning Center
University of Missouri - Kansas City

The Group Reading Activity is a content area reading strategy combining the traditional principles of the Directed Reading Activity (Betts, 1950) and a broad spectrum of recent developments in group dynamics.

Urged by a graduate class on secondary and junior college reading methods to explain how the course text would relate to lectures and how it should be read, teaching assistant Susan Brummet and I worked with the class to design a procedure which would answer the immediate question, and help further with this same concern in their own teaching.

Delving into the issue we found several trouble spots inhibiting our progress. One complex of problems was remarkably similar to a cluster of concerns which has barred wider acceptance of the notion of teaching "reading in the content area"; namely, in what specific ways can the triangle of teacher, class, and text(s) interact, without sublimating the teacher to the book, the class to the teacher or the book, reducing the significance of the content, nor by further burdening the teacher with the constant obligation to develop reading aids, guides, and such? The activity which we ultimately delineated offers a means for a class to hear commentary by the teacher on the issues covered in the text. It also permits students to assist one another in processing the content material by sharing notes and deliberations with one another, as well as by playing certain roles which visibly improve, oral language development, group processing and critical reading/thinking skills.

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Prior to practicing the GRA, it is best that teacher and students discuss and adjust their expectancies to the peculiarities of the activity. Three elements particularily tend to cause varying degrees of dissonance: the difficulty negotiating the activity to conform to typical class length periods; the diminishment of apparent teacher dominance; and, the oddity of peers playing the role of critic. Each of these is fairly easily managed by an adroit teacher willing to sustain some discomfort to arrive at a more participatory classroom atmosphere.

Anatomy of the Group Reading Activity

We tried many variations on the GRA, deciding for our purposes on the version noted below. Different conditions may require appropriate modifications.

I.

a general purpose or critical issue is identified

A general, guiding purpose or critical issue(s) is identified for which the text presumably provides resolve. In the case of our course, we wished to identify that which contributed to our overall knowledge of secondary school reading, and somewhat more specifically to the effective teaching of reading in the content areas. In some cases a purpose or issue may be even more specific - as when we asked the question, "What are the ways in which vocabulary should be taught in the content area?"

II.

the purpose or issue is divided into manageable parts, and parcelled out to groups

The teacher, either alone or in concert with the class, identifies the major topics and sub-topics bearing on the purpose or issue identified. These subsections--better to be no more than a few pages each in length -- are assigned by the teacher to pre-organized groups of approximately five members each...for an activity which might be completed in a single period, subsections can be as short as a few paragraphs.

III.

each group member silently reads and records his findings & deliberations

Each student silently reads and makes notes on the designated passage(s), guided by an outline best suited to the content area; the guide can be developed by the teacher alone or by the teacher with the class. We found our purpose best served by students answering the following teacher-student, agreed-upon questions-

1) What question(s) is being answered?

2) What is the thesis statement?

3) What direct quote(s) support the thesis?

4) What are your comments or criticisms?

IV.

a group statement of the passage(s) read is evolved from individual renditions

A group statement is evoled: the investment by individuals in reading and analysis serves as appropriate preparation for each member of the group to negotiate his deliberations down to a single form representing the group. The group must work to state these cogently; further, agreement must be reached on a means to present the information and conclusions to the class in the most effective way.

V.

the group presents their assessment to a student critic

A critic listens: because group processing is subject to the pitfalls of individual analysis, plus such social dynamics as often tend to make committees ineffective, an individual is chosen from another group, by an alphabetical rotation within that group, to play objective critic to a presentation from a group who has completed stage IV. The critic listens and comments both on the substantive, as well as the way in which it was presented. The group presenting benefit from the "shake-down" run and from feedback provided by facial expressions and such regardless of how

astute the critic--remarkably, critics seem to learn their role as they play it, both in terms of dealing with content and with respect to social conventions, or protocals, for effective delivery.

VI.

appropriate adjustments are made

Adjustments are made accordingly: Following the discussion with the critic, each member of the group is asked to say what he believes was learned from the experience of presenting to the critic, assessing also the value of the explicit criticism offered, and adding further such changes as he believes will improve their analysis and/or presentation.

With no firm concensus from the class, I found that I was deciding upon the actual mode of presentation permitted to a group. The class did not object, we seemed to implicitly agree that an instructor was best qualified to deal with considerations such as the relative generic importance to the course of the passage(s) examined, time constraints, the stage of experience of class members to make a certain kind of presentation, and other matters pertaining to an instructor's perrogatives.

VII.

a presentation is made to the class: a) directly, or b) thru the teacher, or c) in written from with only parenthetical comment by the teacher. Class discussion follows

The Presentation: Working from the above considerations, information sharing, we agreed, was best done in one of three general ways. (1) a designated spokesman from the group presents information directly to the class with an accompanying handout or chalkboard notes. (2) Through the teacher; speaking from their desks, the group tells the teacher--with the class listening--what they found and thought, he records it on the chalkboard, adding his own comments, asking for additional comment from the critic--such as

whether his criticisms were incorporated--and from the class. (3) In written from; using the general outline, or some agreed upon system of annotation, the group records their findings, either on the chalkboard or on a ditto master. The teacher reviews their final rendition, recommending changes prior to distribution, or simply adds comment parenthetically at the time of distribution. Questions and discussion are invited from the class, with the teacher directing the majority of these to the group responsible for making the report.

VIII.

determine relative value of information presented and decide extent to which further reading and study is warranted--but read almost everything at least once.

Value processing: the teacher, deciding for the class, and individuals for themselves, conclude the extent to which further exploration and study of the information presented is necessary. The teacher may decide to lecture further on the topic, assign supplementary reading, or whatever else he feels will strengthen or enhance understanding. The student may decide that the information he has is sufficient, or that, while the presentation may have been adequate, that he still needs to read further, study, and/or seek assistance in better understanding the information.

With the exception of sections which the teacher may explicitly indicate to be inconsequential, the class should "rapid read" each section on which a presentation was made. Whenever possible, class time should be permitted for this; reading time is greatly condensed by advance knowledge. Reading with advance knowledge is a particularily good experience for weaker students who rarely have opportunity to read didatic, content laden material with a feeling of relative speed and accuracy.

Some Alternate and Follow-Up Activities

Stages VII and VIII can be unified by simply involving the entire class in the reprocessing of the information presented by a single group; the class reads selected sections of the original textual material, skimming to verify details, and closely analyzing language and meanings to assess the reasonability of the inferences and conclusions drawn by the group.

At approximately this same stage, the content teacher also has good opportunity to demonstrate how he would score the textbook or make additional cryptic notes to mark significant information or serve to remind him later of useful ideas and associations which occurred while reading.

This is also an appropriate time to teach such understandings and attitudes as the fact that profound comprehension occurs through intensive reading and re-reading, and that long-term learning is further insured by spaced re-reading once basic comprehension has been achieved. These notions are the point of a good lesson, most all else, in this writer's view, are exercises in preparation for these points and demonstration of the veracity of them. So too, the GRA is best viewed as a useful means to bring students, cognitively and affectively, to the point where they might wish to commit themselves to intensive, sustained effort. The GRA contributes to this end by permitting the teacher to directly teach content, demonstrate to students how to read in a particular content area and by adding to student affective enrichment by offering a range of useful experiences - serving as critic, dealing with peer criticism, and group processing.

Some final notes are necessary to the cautious reader. It was not an accident that no mention was made of how the groups should be constituted how the leader should be selected, who should serve as recording secretary, etc.

These are sensitive and complex matters for which little research evidence is available... I permitted each group to do what came naturally to see what would occur. They elected Chairman. Some rotated the chairman when a new assignment was made, others did not. The groups, which were randomly constituted, remained intact throughout our course. Teachers who have subsequently tried the GRA in secondary and junior college classes have varied in the extent to which they have reordered groups after each assignment. All agreed, however, that ordering groups did not seem to be a significant variable.

Reference(s)

Betts, Emmett Albert. "Directed Reading Activities," Foundations of Reading Instruction. New York: American Book Company, 1950.